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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes a developmental course in writing skills designed for college freshmen and offers guidelines for gaining acceptance of the course in the college community. The course consists of six credits of work earned in two semesters. Each week, students are required to attend three class periods, one writing laboratory session, and one individual conference. At the conclusion of the program, students must pass a writing proficiency examination in order to receive grades and credits and to continue in college work. The paper considers the following to be essential in establishing academic respect for the developmental program: defining realistic goals, developing a positive method of evaluation, establishing a base in the English Department, maintaining class work on a college level, limiting class size, and, most importantly, focusing on the individual student with an attitude of respect.  
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Why, Johnny Can Write!

OR

How to Achieve Academic Respectability in Developmental Programs

Twila Yates Papay

Recently at a college symposium, an influential professor publicly sneered at "developmental programs" as a "euphemism for remedial," while another suggested that colleges may soon be granting a "deflated degree" based upon "sixty credits of remedial work." In gloomier moments I read in such comments the overwhelming odds against even the most successful program's combatting the cynicism of an educational elite determined to deny the intelligence of today's semi-literate, educationally disadvantaged college freshmen. Yet my own experience assures me that many of these students are intelligent, that they do learn to read, write, and think (often despite the sneerings of their instructors). The success of such students can be documented by programs all over the country. This article is addressed to people who accept that fact and are preparing their own programs because they share my conviction that developmental students have a capacity for responding to the liberating influence of education.

The problem of establishing a successful developmental English program falls into two stages: finding a workable model, and gaining acceptance for that model in the college community. The Program at Saint Peter's College has evolved over a four-year period through a number of stages and has yet to undergo certain refinements in its struggle for broad-based acceptance. Some 80% of its first group of students graduated in May or August of 1977, and most of the nearly 900 students who have been served by the Program in these four years have moved from an initial belief that their placement was a form of punishment to a sense of accomplishment and pride in their new-found verbal skills.

To accomplish its goals, the Program offers six credits of work spread over a two-semester period, with separate sections for the native-born and the foreign-born. Students attend three class periods, one Writing Laboratory session, and one individual conference weekly. They

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are placed in the Program on the basis of a Writing Sample Placement Test administered the summer before they enter the college and graded by a team of faculty members from the English Department. The grades and credits earned in the second semester are not awarded until the students pass a Proficiency Examination, a final exam again graded by English Department faculty members, who certify that each student is writing acceptable, college-level prose. Students who fail this examination may take a non-credit Writing Workshop for further training or repeat the course sequence. Students must pass the examination in order to continue their work at the college.

Teachers in the Saint Peter's Program have adopted the usual motivational and teaching techniques familiar to developmental English specialists: publication of student writing, peer criticism, field trips, films, awards, and the like. They have tried to experiment, to share ideas, to maintain flexibility and respect for student thinking and writing. In the last two years, they have begun to work more closely with the college's support services as well.

The pattern described above, and others like it, seem to be working well, particularly for smaller colleges with mixed enrollments. Having adopted such a model, then, how does one gain acceptance and support from colleagues and administrators? Experience suggests that one must expect a lack of receptivity, negative attitudes, and, in some cases, downright hostility. To tailor a program, one must persuade oneself and others that it will be "experiemntal," that it will be in a state of flux for several years. Gains made one year may be lost the next, as committee after committee and department after department investigate the program and seek to change its policies. The same point may have to be won several times. Even assuming the presence of friends, then, one must be prepared to bargain, to use tact, to prove oneself and one's students, to visit committees and departments in an effort to explain the program and "wear down" resistance. Hostility may, in fact, prove to be primarily faculty-centered, and its source is most commonly resentment over college admissions policies. Often, it translates into the classic, "I don't ever want to have those dummies in my class!"

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To function in this atmosphere, any program must quickly achieve academic respectability. The following steps should attain this end while assuring a quality program.

First and most important of all is the matter of promises. Never promise too much. Of course, any program in developmental English will involve students and teachers in study skills, reading, use of logic, cultural awareness, campus activities, and the like. BUT PROMISES MUST BE LIMITED TO WRITING SKILLS. The curriculum must be focused consistently upon the teaching of writing, including a large number of writing assignments (Saint Peter's students write journals, twenty to thirty papers, and progress reports each semester), written evaluations of papers, and regular consultations between student and teacher. Students will inevitably learn more than how to write, but teachers should not have to face the added burden of defending the values of this "periphery learning" or demonstrating that it has actually taken place.

Further, the results obtained as promised in improved writing skills must be documented. The program must be "proven" a success to those outside it. Of course, any good teacher of writing recognizes the difficulty of measuring student progress, even though he can easily recognize improvement and readily demonstrate it to himself by comparing earlier and later papers. But such evidence may be deemed "subjective" and therefore discounted. Consequently, quantification is necessary. Quantify everything, even if it only proves what the program's teachers already know. Devise a means of scoring a set of papers written at the beginning and another at the end of the course. Ask teachers to score each others' papers to avoid the accusation of "self-interest," and demonstrate the results with charts published in yearly reports. Written evaluations of each student's progress prepared by teachers are valuable for counseling and assessment purposes, but they should be published in conjunction with the score charts, which many people will more readily accept.

Beyond this care in making and carrying out promises, certain essentials must be agreed upon in the first year if a developmental program is to succeed. First, in most colleges the program should be based in the English Department, its achievements and its teachers evaluated by English

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Department faculty, its reports submitted through them. The advantages of this arrangement are several. Of course, English Department faculty are best equipped to establish and to judge the effectiveness of a writing program, to offer suggestions and support. Most of the program's members should also be teaching literature courses (for purposes of balance, perspective, and professional well-being) and should therefore be members of the Department. Again, if the program's teachers tend to be the younger, non-tenured faculty (an informal survey conducted by the author at the 1977 Conference on College Composition and Communication suggests that this is generally the case), they will surely need the encouragement, approval, support, and, perhaps, protection that only an established Department can provide. This is particularly true in times of fiscal crisis when independent programs, however successful, will disappear far more quickly than settled departments. Again, respectability is often a matter of being known, and the sanction of senior department members, whether they teach in the program or not, will be of use.

Secondly, having established a base in the English Department, program members should avoid any connection with the Admissions Office. Whether one agrees with its policies is not the question here. Faculty members and administrators who oppose the presence of developmental students on campus will be quick to oppose the presence of teachers who make it possible for them to stay. These problems will be compounded if faculty members open themselves to charges of self-interest by defending the very policies which provide for the population of their classrooms. It is generally more useful if others defend the presence of such students (probably dictated by financial necessity in any event), while the teachers devote their energies to providing the sort of training which will enable the students to stay.

Thirdly, no college-level plan of education will be able to achieve and maintain academic respectability if it merely provides remediation, teaching skills generally considered more appropriately covered in elementary classrooms. Nor will college-level students with letters of acceptance in hand be willing to work hard in courses for which no

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college credits are offered. And if credits are to be offered, justice demands that college-level work be covered. Consequently, a clear-cut distinction between remedial and developmental work should be established at the outset and insisted upon in every context. Of course, a writing program for educationally disadvantaged students must include remediation, but it should include all aspects of writing normally taught in a college composition class as well. "Developmental" should be defined as an umbrella term, covering all the skills a student must master to write well. Consequently, one should demand that students completing the developmental English program write acceptably on the college level, and they should not be passed beyond it until they do. Obviously, when they have mastered college-level skills, beyond fundamental remediation, they should be granted college credits. How many credits? This differs widely among colleges which grant credit for developmental work, ranging anywhere from two to fifteen. Students who learn college-level skills should certainly receive the same number of credits granted in the standard freshman composition course, perhaps more. In establishing academic respectability, the actual number seems to be less significant than the fact of granting credit at all.

A corollary to the necessity of granting credit is the need to develop a workable grading system. Progress and effort must surely be taken into account in grading, and students who move from grade level three to grade level eleven in one semester certainly deserve some reward for the effort, something better than the "D" which tells them the college does not think much of their achievements. But "grading on improvement" is easily translated into "A's based upon good will" and "sugar-coated pills" in the thinking of many. The danger of inflating grades is also very real as teachers begin to observe dramatic improvements in student writing. A fair grading system is therefore difficult to arrive at and may require a year or two of experimentation. Consequently, it is wise to avoid open forum discussions of grading except among the teachers in the program. Grading should be monitored closely to avoid extremes until an acceptable method emerges. One should also try to avoid cheapening the course by resorting to the Pass/Fail option, which,

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besides depriving the teacher of a valuable motivational device, implies that the writing coming out of the program does not deserve the more meaningful grading system used in other courses.

Having reached agreement on the essentials outlined above, one is ready to institute a developmental program. But in addition to a great deal of hard work, dedication, and patience on the part of its teachers, the quality of the developmental program will depend upon how successfully it is molded to a particular college's needs, with features added and new policies established as their importance becomes apparent. Class size, for example, should be limited to twelve or fifteen students. A one-semester course will quickly be deemed insufficient, though a year or two of bargaining may be required to win permission to extend the work over two semesters, add more hours of class time, or both. Regular student-teacher conferences will also be essential, but teachers probably will not be paid for the time, and registrars will probably be unwilling to print conference hours on student schedules. Methods of scheduling will have to be improvised, at least temporarily. Again, a Writing Laboratory may be needed, particularly to provide students with practice and drill in matters of grammar and mechanics not adequately covered in the classroom. The director of the developmental program may have to adapt an existing laboratory or seek funding to create one of his own. Apparatus will also be necessary to provide for initial testing of each freshman class for placement in the program. (Even placement recommendations may not be honored in all cases without close monitoring.) Similarly, a proficiency examination should be developed and permission obtained to withhold grades and credits from students who do not pass it.

Having wrestled with all the problems outlined above, developmental English teachers may wish to relax, secure in the possession of a high-quality program certain to succeed. But excellence does not guarantee academic respectability, which totters upon the ambiguous attitudes of faculty members and administrators somewhat removed from the program and its classes. Having resolved the major pedagogical concerns, one must begin Operation Reach-Out, the effort to convince one's colleagues of the

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program's viability, if not desirability. The message is simple: we are raising--repeat, raising--the standards of the college by insisting that students learn how to write well. Standards are lowered, not in developmental English classes, but rather in classes where students are permitted to submit poorly written papers, where objective tests are used, where essays are assigned a grade of "B" or "C" if they merely imply some knowledge of the subject, however badly they may be written. Faculty members should be urged to help the work of developmental teachers by refusing to accept poorly written papers. They should be reminded that learning to write well involves learning to think more clearly, that logic should be demanded, as well as correct spelling and accurate punctuation.

Thus, having established a workable model, one must "wear down" the opposition, pointing out the obligation of the college to provide suitable training for the educationally disadvantaged students it admits, offering evidence that such students are capable of learning, supplying information and argument about the program and its accomplishments to committees and departments. One must bargain tactfully, spreading good public relations throughout the campus with frequent explanation and discussion. Most important of all in achieving academic respectability are demonstrable results in good writing and improved student performance. And those results are finally obtainable only by maintaining a continual focus upon the students themselves. The program's director must himself teach developmental courses on a regular basis, establishing a day-to-day working relationship with the students and with fellow teachers in the program. Teachers must remain flexible, exchanging ideas which encourage close attention to individual student progress. For the key to establishing and maintaining a quality developmental English program lies in respecting the student and helping him force others to respect him, to admit that indeed he CAN write, and that he has a great deal to say.

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